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Deconstructing Mythic Triumph: The Battle of New Orleans

Catherine James

During the War of 1812, the Battle of New Orleans was a conclusive American victory in what was an otherwise militarily inconclusive war. In the nineteenth century, Americans celebrated January 8, 1815 as a patriotic holiday equivalent to the Fourth of July. Most American historians of the nineteenth and early twentieth century asserted that the battle was extremely important because had the British captured New Orleans, they would have probably repudiated the Treaty of Ghent and tried to hem in the United States east of the Mississippi River. These historians also focused on American military tactics, particularly the long odds that the outnumbered Americans overcame to beat the British. All American historians chronicling the Battle of New Orleans in the nineteenth and early twentieth century placed Andrew Jackson at the center of their works. They believed the battle was important because America had been humiliated by the British in the war up until that point, then Jackson took charge and annihilated the British to become the “Hero of America” and the “Symbol of the Age,” going on to capture the presidency on the basis of that popularity. With the advent of social and cultural history in the mid-twentieth century, American historians’ views of the Battle of New Orleans changed significantly, from a defining moment to a minor incident that America won due to a lack of British coordination.¹ The role of African-Americans, Indian tribes such as the Choctaws, Creoles, and pirates under Jean Lafitte have all been explored by historians in recent

1 Robert V. Remini, *The Battle of New Orleans* (New York: Viking, 1999), 217-220.

years. Moreover, the heroism of Andrew Jackson in the battle has been questioned, with several historians branding him a military despot instead of national savior. Finally, the historiography of the Battle of New Orleans is even broadening to include women and music.

Within the domain of Battle of New Orleans historiography, the most basic category is that of military strategy. *Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands* by Frank Owsley, Jr. ranks as the standard work on American tactics, drawing on Jackson's papers, Department of War records, and Creole Major André Latour's memoir. Owsley cites figures of 5,000 American troops versus 10,000 British soldiers and stresses Jackson's strong defensive line within a swamp and wooded area.² Yet, Owsley argues that Jackson's best tactic was his "ability to drive himself and his army through almost any kind of hardship, to maintain good discipline..., and never to lose confidence that he would win in the end."³ While agreeing with Owsley's flattering assessment of Jackson's leadership, historian Charles Brooks' *The Siege of New Orleans* emphasizes the tactical value of a mud breastwork Jackson's troops and conscripted slaves constructed along his defensive line, which forced the British to attack head-on across unprotected, flat terrain and thus doomed them to suffer massive casualties against an inexperienced American army.⁴ In 1969, Wilburt Brown offered a new view of the battle's strategy, evaluating British Admiralty Office records and concluding that the American navy under direction of Commandant Patterson played a crucial role in supporting Jackson and demoralized British troops by steady bombardment.⁵ Finally, a provocatively revisionist thesis proposed by military

2 Frank Owsley, Jr., *Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands: The Creek War and the Battle of New Orleans 1812-1815* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1981), 157-162.

3 Ibid., 5.

4 Charles B. Brooks, *The Siege of New Orleans* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1961), 227-252.

5 Wilburt S. Brown, *The Amphibious Campaign for West Florida and Louisiana, 1814-1815: A Critical Review of Strategy and Tactics at New Orleans* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press,

historian John Mahon harshly criticizes Jackson for his negligence in defending his right flank, a mistake that Mahon claims could have altered the eventual outcome of the battle and, at the least, posed a serious threat.⁶

After works on American battle tactics and strategy, the next major category of Battle of New Orleans historiography analyzes the consequences of the American victory. The traditional reading of the battle as a defining moment, indeed as justification of American national identity, remains the view of most American historians today. For example, Donald Hickey's benchmark recent history of the War of 1812 confirms that the Battle of New Orleans "promoted national self-confidence and encouraged the heady expansionism that lay at the heart of American foreign policy for the rest of the century."⁷ Likewise, Robert Remini's monograph *The Battle of New Orleans* describes the American victory as a pivot because in "one glorious moment the nation had demonstrated that it had the strength, will, and ability to defend its freedom and proved to the world that it was here to stay, that its sovereignty and rights were to be respected by all."⁸ In recent decades, however, some historians have questioned the nationalistic implications of the battle. Because New Orleans was the overall war's only victory and won by a Southerner, Frank Owsley, Jr.'s *Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands* argues that the battle disproportionately aided the South and led to the ascendance of that section's political power.⁹ Daniel Walker Howe, author of the definitive history of the early American Republic, also suggests a reinterpretation of the battle's consequences. He asserts that the Battle of New Orleans definitively ended fear of foreign domination, but concurrently manifested a

1969), 169, 175-179.

6 John K. Mahon, *The War of 1812* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1972), 368.

7 Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 3.

8 Remini, *Battle of New Orleans*, 195.

9 Owsley, Jr., 194-195.

tension within American society over national destiny – a future of urban, industrial progress, as evidenced by mass-produced artillery at the battle, or a future of westward expansion and individual frontiersmen, epitomized by Jackson.¹⁰

Any history of the Battle of New Orleans necessarily involves Andrew Jackson, who took charge and annihilated the British to become an American hero. This historiographical category is traditional, but it has many present-day adherents, who believe that the Battle of New Orleans launched Jackson's political career on the basis of his personal popularity as a victorious general and eventually secured him the presidency. John W. Ward's aptly named 1955 work, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age*, stands as the best example of the hagiography surrounding Jackson and his New Orleans victory. Ward declares that "[i]n the victory at New Orleans, Jackson was explicitly and directly connected with God."¹¹ Currently, Robert Remini, Jackson's chief modern scholarly biographer, continues the "Great Man" history of Jackson and New Orleans. Remini's monograph, *The Battle of New Orleans*, affirms that, due to "his victory at New Orleans, General Jackson became a hero such as the people of America had never enjoyed before."¹² He concludes that the American public elected Jackson to the presidency, despite his lack of education and few political credentials, as a reward for his fundamental role in upholding American independence at New Orleans.¹³

Controversy over American involvement in the Vietnam War convinced some historians to reassess the glory enveloping previous

10 Daniel Walker Howe, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815-1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 17-18.

11 John W. Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), 108.

12 Remini, *Battle of New Orleans*, 197.

13 *Ibid.*, 198.

American military engagements, including the Battle of New Orleans. From a defining moment that catapulted Andrew Jackson to the White House, the battle plunged to a minor incident that America won due to sheer luck, not superior strategy. Writing in 1969, historian Carson Ritchie was an early skeptic of the defining moment category of historiography. In fact, Ritchie acerbically describes the battle as “won and lost in a matter of minutes.”¹⁴ He also contends that British military blunders, such as lack of guns and equipment as well as general panic among troops, handed victory to the Americans, thus rejecting prevailing historiographic accounts of strong American defenses.¹⁵ Similarly, J. C. A. Stagg, author of *Mr. Madison’s War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830*, argues that America emerged victorious at the Battle of New Orleans because of adequacy rather than tactical supremacy.¹⁶ Stagg asserts the battle was no defining moment, but an episode when “the United States had done little more than survive.”¹⁷ More recently, Daniel Walker Howe has reinterpreted the American victory as unnecessary, “a particularly tragic result of the slowness of communication at the start of the nineteenth century.”¹⁸ In other words, the battle was avoidable since a peace treaty between the United States and Britain had already been signed in December 1814, hence invalidating the reason for the battle in January 1815; ironically, news of the Treaty of Ghent did not arrive in the United States until February 1815, subsequent to the battle.

Historians have also reconsidered the generic white male

14 Carson Ritchie, “The Guns of New Orleans,” *The History Teacher* 2, no. 4 (May 1969): 13.

15 *Ibid.*, 10-12.

16 J. C. A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison’s War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early American Republic, 1783-1830* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 498.

17 *Ibid.*, 501.

18 Howe, 15-16.

characterization of the Battle of New Orleans, looking anew at primary sources to discover what role many diverse peoples had in the battle. Prompted by the Civil Rights Movement, African-American historian Donald E. Everett asserted in a groundbreaking 1955 journal article that a battalion composed of free black New Orleans residents played an important role in Jackson's victory. According to Everett, the free black troops provided Jackson much-needed manpower and showed more skill and courage in battle than white soldiers. Everett views the Battle of New Orleans as a very early example of racial equality because Jackson granted free black troops the same pay and provisions as white soldiers, as well as promising respect for their service within his ranks.¹⁹ However, writing a few decades after Everett, historian Robert Remini called attention to another aspect of the African-American experience in his book *Andrew Jackson and The Course of American Empire*. Remini argues that free black troops played only a minor role in the Battle of New Orleans and instead states that the unpaid, forced labor of black slaves who built fortifications for Jackson decided the American victory. Indeed, Remini equates the role of slaves in the Battle of New Orleans to the South's rise on the basis of slave labor and thereby infers unwillingness among Americans to acknowledge the wrongs that coexist with past national triumphs.²⁰

Another facet of the historiography of the Battle of New Orleans involves the question of whether the Creole population, with only two years experience of statehood, was dedicated to the American cause and, by extension, Jackson's leadership. The dominant interpretation presumes that while Creoles may not have openly engaged in treason, they did not

19 Donald E. Everett, "Emigres and Militiamen: Free Persons of Color in New Orleans, 1803-1815," *Journal of Negro History* 38, no. 4 (October 1953): 395-398.

20 Robert V. Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire, 1767-1821* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977), 273.

enthusiastically support Jackson's efforts to defend their city. As Charles Brooks observes in *The Siege of New Orleans*, Jackson "carried from New Orleans more than the memory of a great military victory; he carried the experience of trying to govern a strong-willed people."²¹ Even Donald Hickey, author of the preeminent modern account of the War of 1812, concludes that Creoles "radiated disloyalty and defeatism."²² In contrast, Paul Gelpi, Jr. poses a challenge to the prevailing consensus about the non-Anglo-American population's allegiance. He asserts that the Battle of New Orleans served as the climax of a "process of Americanization that Louisiana's Creole community underwent."²³ Examining the Battalion d'Orleans, an all-volunteer militia unit composed solely of New Orleans Creoles, Gelpi determined that, although many contemporary Americans identified Creoles as a security threat, the battalion demonstrated Creole patriotism, defending the city itself and hence enabling Jackson to concentrate on the vital periphery.²⁴ Interestingly, Joseph Tregle reinterprets the question of Creole loyalty into a question of Jackson's own paranoia; in effect, Tregle argues the battle was a cross-cultural clash within American society.²⁵ He states that "New Orleans was entirely outside the general's experience...and he was convinced that from these exotic people, native and foreign alike, one could only expect difficulty and most likely treachery."²⁶

Perhaps the most colorful category of Battle of New Orleans historiography is that of the Baratarian pirates' role in defeating the British.

21 Brooks, 270.

22 Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 206.

23 Paul D. Gelpi, Jr., "Mr. Jefferson's Creoles: The Battalion d'Orléans and the Americanization of Creole Louisiana, 1803-1815," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 48, no. 3 (Summer 2007): 297.

24 *Ibid.*, 297-312.

25 Joseph G. Tregle, "Andrew Jackson and the Continuing Battle of New Orleans," *Journal of the Early Republic* 1, no. 4 (Winter 1981): 373-378.

26 *Ibid.*, 375.

In recent decades, the view of the majority of historians has been that Jean Laffite and his pirate crew were second only to Jackson in saving the nation from British subjugation. This interpretation was first advanced by Jane Lucas De Grummond in her 1961 monograph, *The Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans*. Drawing on a journal supposedly written by Lafitte, De Grummond declared that the pirates provided vital arms, men, and information to Jackson, which afforded him a strategic edge over the British.²⁷ In assent with De Grummond, military historian Wilburt Brown confirms that “it is possible that Jackson might have defended the city successfully without the aid of the Baratarians, but it is probable that he could not have done so if Lafitte and his men had accepted British offers.”²⁸ A decidedly positive assessment of the pirates’ contribution is found in Donald Hickey’s *The War of 1812*, in which he verifies their invaluable artillery skill and familiarity with local topography and concludes that “Jean Lafitte the Baratarian leader, got along so well with Jackson that he became the general’s unofficial aide-de-camp.”²⁹ Recently, however, Robert Vogel has offered a revisionist concept of the pirates’ pivotal role. First, Vogel maintains that Jackson grudgingly accepted the pirates’ help, actually referring to them as “hellish banditti.” Upon critical review of primary documents, namely district court case files and military disbursement records, Vogel found that the Baratarians did not give large quantities of either guns or ammunition; in addition, only about fifty pirates – not hundreds as formerly alleged – fought with Jackson on January 8, 1815.³⁰ Lastly, Vogel objects to claims of the pirates’ patriotic motivation in joining Jackson. He insists that “a more rational explana-

27 Jane Lucas De Grummond, *The Baratarians and the Battle of New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1961), 18-21.

28 Brown, 31.

29 Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, 207.

30 Robert C. Vogel, “Jean Laffite, the Baratarians, and the Battle of New Orleans: A Reappraisal,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 41, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 264-271.

tion would be that the Bartarians came to the aid of Jackson because they concluded it was to their advantage to do so as underworld businessmen” who were deterred by British and Spanish naval surveillance of the Gulf of Mexico.³¹

Currently, the historiography of the Battle of New Orleans is experiencing a renewal of interest and challenging the status quo of military history, male history, and glorified history. In fact, one of the foremost trends in this historiography today has been to question the heroism of Andrew Jackson in the battle, with several historians branding him a military despot instead of national savior. Typical of earlier historians, Robert Remini admitted Jackson’s implementation of martial law prior to the battle and his continuation of it weeks after the battle ended was not justified. Remini states that “Jackson established a police state with no other authority but his own. He clearly overreached himself.”³² Yet, Remini also excuses Jackson’s martial law, arguing that his “total sense of duty” compelled him to continue martial law.³³ In contrast, Matthew Warshaeur conclusively labels Jackson a military despot. He stresses that Jackson’s “cancellation of the civil government touched on one of the most fundamental notions of American freedom: that the military shall remain subordinate to civil authority. Martial law in New Orleans was a classic republican battle between liberty and power.”³⁴ Warshaeur emphasizes the absence of a precedent in America for suspending habeas corpus and contends that Jackson’s implementation of martial law in New Orleans had long-term consequences, instilling

31 Ibid., 275.

32 Remini, *Andrew Jackson and the Course of American Empire*, 311.

33 Ibid., 312.

34 Matthew Warshauer, “The Battle of New Orleans Reconsidered: Andrew Jackson and Martial Law,” *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 39, no. 3 (Summer 1998): 262.

in Jackson a “sense of unlimited authority. Indeed, such attributes were exceedingly apparent in later episodes, such as Jackson’s invasion of Florida in 1819 and his later war on the Bank of the United States.”³⁵

Like Warshaeur, Joseph Tregle condemns Jackson’s martial law in New Orleans, but claims that the greatest impact of Jackson’s unjustified actions was seen in the presidential election of 1828. In the campaign, Tregle says, Jackson’s opponents’ most powerful weapon was the image of him as disrespectful of constitutional and legal precedents with New Orleans as proof positive.³⁶

Finally, Battle of New Orleans historiography has recently developed cultural and female perspectives, though not prolifically. For example, music historian Charles Kinzer explores the role played by free blacks who composed the First Battalion of Free Men of Color’s unit band. He finds that, during the battle itself, the band played to sustain troop morale and performed such patriotic songs as “Yankee Doodle” and, for Creole troops, “The Marseillaise.” Kinzer believes that members of the free black battalion’s band should not only be recognized as the originators of a tradition of American military music, but also as the founders of New Orleans’ own distinct musical heritage.³⁷ On the other hand, historians Catherine Allgor and Robert Remini investigate American women’s primary function in commemorating the Battle of New Orleans. Within the larger framework of evaluating women’s political roles in the newly established national capital, Allgor relates that in 1828 Louisa Catherine Adams, wife of presidential candidate John Quincy Adams, commemorated the victory of her husband’s arch-rival at New

³⁵ Ibid., 291.

³⁶ Tregle, 383.

³⁷ Charles E. Kinzer, “The Band of Music of the First Battalion of Free Men of Color and the Siege of New Orleans, 1814-1815,” *American Music* 10, no. 3 (Autumn 1992): 348-362.

Orleans by means of a grand ball. Allgor asserts that by honoring Jackson, John Quincy Adams would “appear to rise above personal interest in celebrating a national hero.”³⁸ Yet, since it was thought unseemly to actively campaign for the presidency, Louisa Catherine Adams would actually be the center of attention, “the representative of the house, her husband, her family, and all the political freight associated with the event.”³⁹ Similarly, Robert Remini establishes the key role of New Orleans women in celebrating Jackson’s victory in the days after the battle, describing a scene of young women dressed as “Liberty” and all of the current states and territories at a thanksgiving mass.⁴⁰

In summary, despite revisionist works, the significance of the Battle of New Orleans as a defining moment of national self-confidence remains as the prevailing consensus among today’s American historians. While consensus exists as to the broad meaning of the battle, much debate is focused on the future direction of history about this topic. Author of the standard work on the War of 1812, historian Donald Hickey argues that since the 1980s the Battle of New Orleans has been better served by historians, but their attention has still been disproportionately directed toward military and political history rather than the homefront, which contains greater potential for new knowledge.⁴¹ Future analysis of the battle should step beyond traditional constraints and take an in-depth look at the human dimension within the topic. A thorough survey of women’s role in the war, akin to Drew Gilpin Faust’s equivalent Civil War study, is needed, especially in order to answer the question of Creole

38 Catherine Allgor, *Parlor Politics: In Which the Ladies of Washington Help Build a City and a Government* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000), 177.

39 Ibid., 180.

40 Remini, *Battle of New Orleans*, 187-188.

41 Donald R. Hickey, “The War of 1812: Still A Forgotten Conflict?,” *Journal of Military History* 65, no. 3 (July 2001): 757, 765.

women's unique experience. Likewise, analysis of Native Americans' role in the battle is incomplete, failing to examine how their participation was later denied in order to disqualify their citizenship and property rights. Moreover, analogous to the marring of Jackson's legacy by his presidential policy of Indian removal, it is foreseeable that the Battle of New Orleans will assume the same myth-busting role in connection to him. Ultimately, future research should consider New Orleans itself. In January 1815, the city had a brief history as part of the United States and contained a heterogeneous ethnic citizenry – Americans, English, Spanish, French, Haitians, slaves, and free blacks. The process by which such different and often competing factions were reconciled and united, both physically in arms and psychologically in common patriotic cause, is truly what makes the Battle of New Orleans distinctive.